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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRUSSELS 000970

SIPDIS

SACEUR FOR CHARLES KUZELL AND LARRY BUTLER. STATE FOR  
EUR/WE AND EUR/RPM

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SUBJECT: SACEUR: JULY 15 MEETING WITH THE BELGIAN GOVERNMENT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Wayne Bush for reasons 1.4 B & D.

1. (C) Admiral Stavridis, Embassy Brussels welcomes your visit to Brussels and wishes to provide you background for your upcoming meetings with Belgian King Albert II, Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy, Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht, Defense Minister Peter De Crem, and Chief of Defense General Charles-Henri Delcour. The meetings take place against the backdrop of a coming Cabinet reshuffle, after which FM De Gucht will depart for the European Commission, and in the midst of growing Belgian concern about the economy and the government's widening budget deficit. U.S. Embassy Brussels has actively promoted greater Belgian engagement in Afghanistan, closer cooperation on counterterrorism and better coordination with the GOB in Africa. End Summary.

2. (C) Cooperation with NATO and USG: Belgium is a founding member of NATO. Although the GOB opposed the U.S. intervention in Iraq, under the current government it has committed a proportionately significant amount of its military resources to ISAF in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Belgium has for years fallen far short of the NATO objective of spending at least two percent of GDP on defense, and is not likely to increase from the 1.2 percent level given the current restrictive budget environment. The USG has 1200 personnel stationed in US Army Garrisons in Brussels and Chievres, which provide support to U.S. forces at NATO and SHAPE respectively. The USAF 309th Airlift Squadron is also at Chievres. The USG maintains a Munitions Support Squadron (MUNNS) at the Belgian air base at Kleine Brogel. The Belgian port of Antwerp is an important link in the lines of communication between the CONUS and Iraq, and a small detachment from the 21st Theater Support Command is located there to assist.

3. (C) Political Situation: Herman Van Rompuy took office in December, 2008, after his predecessor resigned amid controversy surrounding his efforts to ensure the sale of Belgium's Fortis bank to the French bank BNP Paribas. Van Rompuy has long experience in Belgian politics, which are deeply influenced by the rivalry between the country's Dutch- and French-speaking communities. Van Rompuy keeps a low profile and is focused on domestic consensus-building and the budget rather than advancing an ambitious agenda. He is a leader of the center-right Flemish Christian Democratic party. Regional elections held June 7 brought parties to power in the Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels Capital regions that are different than the party coalition that currently serves in PM Van Rompuy's federal government. It is unclear how regional priorities will affect Van Rompuy's efforts to reach a compromise on the federal budget, which must be approved by Parliament on October 2. FM De Gucht has recently decided to leave the government and take Belgium's

EU Commission slot as Commissioner for Development Assistance. Van Rompuy is expected to announce a new Cabinet by the end of July. We expect his predecessor Yves Leterme to become the new Foreign Minister and Pieter De Crem to remain as Defense Minister.

¶4. (U) Role of the King: King Albert II took the oath as King of the Belgians on August 9, 1993. As head of state, the King plays a largely ceremonial and symbolic role. His primary political function is to designate a political leader to form a new cabinet following either an election, the resignation of a government, or a parliamentary vote of no confidence. The King is seen as playing a symbolic unifying role, representing a common Belgian identity. He signs laws and treaties after passage by Parliament. He is also the Commander in Chief of the Belgian armed forces. He and his wife, Queen Paola, celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary July 2.

¶5. (C) Afghanistan: Belgium's Defense Minister, Flemish Christian Democrat Pieter De Crem, is an outspoken supporter of a robust Belgian role in NATO. De Crem has led Belgium to increase its military efforts in Afghanistan since the 2007 elections -- despite resource limitations and considerable opposition. Outgoing Foreign Minister, Flemish Liberal Karel De Gucht generally supports Belgium's role in ISAF but is cautious about endangering Belgian troops and relying on the Karzai government, which he views as corrupt. Belgium currently provides four F-16s and support personnel in Kandahar, security forces for the Kabul airport, and an Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (OMLT) and other

BRUSSELS 00000970 002 OF 002

personnel that participate in the German-led PRT in Kunduz. Belgium will send two more F-16s to Afghanistan by the end of July and a second OMLT by December. Currently, more than 500 Belgian soldiers are deployed in Afghanistan out of 1200 worldwide. Sixty to seventy percent of Belgium's defense budget is spent on NATO operations, including ISAF. Belgium has provided nearly \$40 million in development assistance to Afghanistan since 2003, and has recently doubled its pledge for each of the next two years from \$6 million to \$12 million. Belgium has also deployed troops to Kosovo, Lebanon, Chad (for Darfur refugees), and the DRC.

¶6. (C) Africa: Belgium's relationship with its former colony, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is one of its main foreign policy priorities. The Embassy has been working hard to improve information exchanges between the Belgian Ministry of Defense and AFRICOM on security sector reform in the Eastern DRC. Belgium has provided troops to an EU force in Chad to protect refugees from Darfur, and is sending a frigate to assist in anti-piracy efforts off the coast of Somalia. In June, Belgium asked the USG for assistance in landing a vessel protection detachment after a Belgian owned dredger, the Pompei, was released by the Somali pirates who captured the ship in April. The United States agreed to assist but did not have a vessel close enough to provide the support within the requested timeline. The GOB nonetheless very much appreciated the USG's willingness to respond.

¶7. (C) Economic Crisis: Belgium's banking system nearly collapsed before the government stepped in last fall to rescue the most important banks. The largest bank, Fortis, was taken over by the French bank BNP Paribas. The outlook for the entire banking sector was recently downgraded by Moody's from stable to negative. Unemployment is rising, closing in on seven percent in Flanders, where the economy is heavily dependent on trade, foreign investment, transport through the Port of Antwerp, and diamonds. The unemployment rate has not risen as much iintelligenchor medical treatmentQran has the potential to play a constructive role on Afghanistan, but doubts that Iran will relinquish its nuclear ambitions and is skeptical that diplomacy will ultimately prove effective in dealing with Iran's nuclear program. The Belgians appeared to

substantially reduce Iranian financial transactions through Belgian banks when we raised the issue last year. De Gucht focused heavily on Iran in 2007 in part because two Belgian tourists from his home town were briefly held hostage by bandits in a remote area of Iran. During its 2007-2008 tenure on the UN Security Council, Belgium chaired the Iran sanctions committee and coordinated closely with us on nonproliferation issues.

¶10. (C) Guantanamo: In December, De Gucht said that Belgium would do its part to address the question of Guantanamo detainees. Two recent trips by Special Envoy Daniel Fried have moved Belgium closer to taking action, and the Belgians are currently viewing files of specific detainees to decide whether to accept any of them.

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